

The Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Alton

Kortny Sloan
Good Shepherd Lutheran School, Collinsville
Teacher: Michael Voss

On October 15, candidates for an Illinois seat in the U. S. Senate, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, debated for the last time in Alton. There twenty-one years earlier a pro-slavery mob had murdered Elijah P. Lovejoy for publishing an anti-slavery newspaper. Gustave Koerner pictured the effect of two months of campaigning on the two men.

Was the Lincoln-Douglas Debate of Alton, Illinois, one of Lincoln's most powerful speeches? Douglas occupied an hour in opening. Lincoln followed, occupying an hour and a half, and Douglas closed with a speech of half an hour. After the adjournment of the meeting, Dr. Hope, National Democratic candidate for Congress, appeared in front of the stand and asked to be heard, but because his first words were against Douglas, that man's friends in the crowd set up a storm of yells, which completely drowned out Hope's voice. The noisy parties could be easily detected as rowdies and drunkards who kept up a continual shout for Douglas. One man had a quart whisky bottle, which he held aloft, and screamed out an invitation for the "Douglas boys" to come and drink. The quart of whisky soon disappeared.

Douglas rose and brought the great series of debates to a close with a smashing finish. Douglas stated that slavery had never endangered the Union. "Douglas cared more for the great principle of self-government . . . than I do for all the Negroes in Christendom." He told once more how local legislation could prohibit slavery.

Douglas' deep voice was giving out. Lincoln showed no sign of fatigue. Democrats supporting President James Buchanan were present in force to upset him, even heckling him at the speaker's platform. Douglas struck at the Buchanan administration harder than at Lincoln. He roared that the Administration Democrats were traitorously working with the Republicans in this campaign.

Lincoln began telling how pleasant it was to hear Douglas attack Buchanan. Becoming serious, Lincoln concluded his parting the debates with a summary of the silent doctrines of his campaign appeal. He spent a great deal of time refuting the "beautiful fabrication" of his opponent that he sought "a perfect social and political equality between the white and black races read from his own speeches and those of Henry Clay to prove that the Republican position on the Negro question was that of the men who founded the Republic." One by one he covered the important points of the controversy: the danger that blacks might become property, "and nothing but property . . . in all the states of this union." The necessity of non-extension and slavery's menace to the nation's unity were important. The real issue of the vote "is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time, and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity, and the other 'diving rights of kings.'" This speech was one of the most powerful speeches Lincoln ever made.

Lincoln brought his campaign to an end with an address in Springfield, on October 30. In his conclusion—the only part of his speech has been preserved—he spoke movingly of his own motives. One the same day Lincoln tried to combat an untruth that accused him of bigotry.

The end of the long debate was moments away. Lincoln reduced months of argument to a simple issue, so clear that no one could misunderstand it, so freighted with moral significance that none could regard it with an easy conscience. Lincoln won the debate. [From Paul M. Angle and Earl Schenck Miers, *The Living Lincoln*; William E. Baringer, *Lincoln's Rise to Power*; Abraham Lincoln, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*; and Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*.]